
ANGER Causes and Coping Strategies

Understanding Anger

We all know what anger is, and we've all felt it - whether as a fleeting annoyance or as full-fledged rage. Anger is usually a normal human emotion, but when it gets out of control and turns destructive, it can lead to problems - problems at work, in your personal relationships, and in the overall quality of your life. It can make you feel as though you're at the mercy of an unpredictable and powerful emotion.

The emotion of anger is neither good nor bad. It's perfectly normal to get angry when you've been mistreated or wronged or something does not happen as per the norms set by you. The feeling isn't the problem - it's what you do with it that makes a difference. Anger becomes a problem when it harms you or the others.

If you have a hot temper, you may feel like it's out of your hands and there's little you can do to tame the beast. But you have more control over your anger than you think. You *can* learn to express your emotions without hurting others - and when you do, you'll not only feel better, you'll also be more likely to get your needs met. Mastering the art of anger management takes work, but the more you practice, the easier it will get. And the payoff can be huge. Learning to control your anger and expressing it appropriately can help you build better relationships, achieve your goals, and lead a healthier, more satisfying life.

The Nature of Anger

Anger is an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage. Like other emotions, it is accompanied by physiological and biological changes. When you get angry, your heart rate and blood pressure go up, as do the levels of your energy hormones, adrenaline, and noradrenaline.

Anger can be caused by both external and internal events. You could be angry at a specific person (coworker or supervisor at your workplace) or event (traffic jam, cancelled flight), or your anger could be caused by worrying or brooding about your personal problems. Memories of traumatic or enraging events can also trigger angry feelings.

Expressing Anger

The instinctive, natural way to express anger is to respond aggressively. Anger is a natural, adaptive response to threats. It inspires powerful, often aggressive, feelings and behaviors, which allow us to fight and to defend ourselves when we are attacked. A certain amount of anger, therefore, is necessary to our survival.

On the other hand, we can't physically lash out at every person who irritates or annoys us - laws, social norms and common sense place limits on how far our anger can take us.

People use a variety of both conscious and unconscious processes to deal with their angry feelings. The three main approaches are expressing, suppressing, and calming. Expressing your angry feelings in an assertive - not aggressive - manner is the healthiest way to express anger. To do this, you have to learn how to make clear what your needs are, and how to get them met, without hurting others. Being assertive doesn't mean being pushy or demanding - it means being respectful of yourself and others.

Anger can be suppressed, and then converted or redirected. This happens when you hold in your anger, stop thinking about it, and focus on something positive. The aim is to inhibit or suppress your anger and convert it into more constructive behaviour. The danger in this type of response is that if it isn't allowed outward expression, your anger can turn inward - on yourself. Anger turned inward may cause hypertension, high blood pressure, or depression.

Unexpressed anger can create other problems. It can lead to pathological expressions of anger, such as passive-aggressive behaviour (getting back at people indirectly, without telling them why, rather than confronting them head-on) or a personality that seems perpetually cynical and hostile. People who are constantly putting others down, criticizing everything, and making cynical comments haven't learned how to constructively express their anger. Not surprisingly, they aren't likely to have many successful relationships.

Finally, you can calm down inside. This means not just controlling your outward behavior, but also controlling your internal responses, taking steps to lower your heart rate, calm yourself down, and let the feelings subside.

Dynamics of Anger

- We become more angry when we are stressed and body resources are down.
- We are rarely angry for the reasons we think.
- We are often angry when we didn't get what we needed as a child.
- We often become angry when we see a trait in others we can't stand in ourselves.
- Underneath many current angers are old disappointments, traumas, and triggers.
- Sometimes we get angry because we were hurt as a child.
- We get angry when a current event brings up an old unresolved situation from the past.
- We often feel strong emotion when a situation has a similar content, words or energy that we have felt before.

Pay attention to the way anger feels in your body

- Knots in your stomach
- Clenching your hands or jaw
- Feeling clammy or flushed
- Breathing faster
- Headaches
- Pacing or needing to walk around
- “Seeing red”
- Having trouble concentrating
- Pounding heart
- Tensing your shoulders

Why Are Some People More Angry Than Others?

Some people are more "hot headed" than others - they get angry more easily and more intensely than the average person does. There are also those who don't show their anger in loud spectacular ways but are chronically irritable and grumpy. Easily angered people don't always curse and throw things – sometimes they withdraw socially, sulk, or get physically ill.

People who are easily angered generally have a low tolerance for frustration. They feel that they should not have to be subjected to frustration, inconvenience, or annoyance. They can't take things in stride, and they're particularly infuriated if the situation seems somehow unjust - for example, being corrected for a minor mistake.

What makes these people this way? One cause may be genetic or physiological. There is evidence that some children are born irritable, touchy, and easily angered, and that these signs are present from a very early age. Another may be socio-cultural. Anger is often regarded as negative - we're taught that it's all right to express anxiety, depression, or other emotions but not to express anger. As a result, we don't learn how to handle it or channel it constructively.

Studies have reported that family background also plays a role. Typically, people who are easily angered come from families that are disruptive, chaotic and not skilled at emotional communications.

Anger is often a cover-up for other feelings

In order to get your needs met and express your anger in appropriate ways, you need to be in touch with what you are really feeling. Are you truly angry? Or is your anger masking other feelings such as embarrassment, insecurity, hurt, shame, or vulnerability?

If your knee-jerk response in many situations is anger, it is very likely that your temper is covering up your true feelings and needs. This is especially likely if you grew up in a family where expressing feelings was strongly discouraged. As an adult, you may have a hard time acknowledging feelings other than anger.

There's something more to your anger

1. **You have a hard time compromising** - Is it hard for you to understand other people's points of view, and even harder to concede a point? If you grew up in a family where anger was out of control, you may remember how the angry person got his or her way by being the loudest and most demanding. Compromising might bring up scary feelings of failure and vulnerability.
2. **You view different opinions and viewpoints as a personal challenge to you** - Do you believe that your way is always right and get angry when others disagree? If you have a strong need to be in control or a fragile ego, you may interpret other perspectives as a challenge to your authority, rather than simply a different way of looking at things.

If you are uncomfortable with many emotions, disconnected, or stuck on an angry one-note response to everything, it might do you some good to get back in touch with your feelings. Emotional awareness is the key to self-understanding and success in life. Without the ability to recognize, manage, and deal with the full range of human emotions, you'll inevitably spin into confusion, isolation, and self-doubt.

Myths and Facts about Anger

Myth: I shouldn't "hold in" my anger. It's healthy to vent and let it out.

Fact: While it's true that suppressing and ignoring anger is unhealthy, venting is no better. Anger is not something you have to "let out" in an aggressive way in order to avoid blowing up. In fact, outbursts and tirades only fuel the fire and reinforce your anger problem.

Myth: Anger, aggression, and intimidation help me earn respect and get what I want.

Fact: True power doesn't come from bullying others. People may be afraid of you, but they won't respect you if you can't control yourself or handle opposing viewpoints. Others will be more willing to listen to you and accommodate your needs if you communicate in a respectful way.

Myth: I can't help myself. Anger isn't something you can control.

Fact: You can't always control the situation you're in or how it makes you feel, but you *can* control how you express your anger. And you *can* express your anger without being verbally or physically abusive. Even if someone is pushing your buttons, you always have a choice about how to respond.

Myth: Anger management is about learning to suppress your anger.

Fact: Never getting angry is not a good goal. Anger is normal, and it will come out regardless of how hard you try to suppress it. Anger management is all about becoming aware of your underlying feelings and needs and developing healthier ways to manage upset. Rather than trying to suppress your anger, the goal is to express it in constructive ways.

Why learning to control your anger is important

- **Out-of-control anger hurts your physical health.**

Constantly operating at high levels of stress and tension is bad for your health. Chronic anger makes you more susceptible to heart disease, diabetes, high cholesterol levels, weak immune system, insomnia, and high blood pressure.



- **Out-of-control anger hurts your mental health.**

Chronic anger consumes huge amounts of mental energy and clouds your thinking, making it harder to concentrate, see the bigger picture, and enjoy life. It can also lead to stress, depression, and other mental health problems.

- **Out-of-control anger hurts your career.**

Constructive criticism, creative differences, and heated debate can be healthy. But lashing out only alienates your colleagues, supervisors, or clients and erodes their respect. What's more, a bad reputation can follow you wherever you go, making it harder and harder to get ahead.

- **Out-of-control anger hurts your relationships with others.**

It causes lasting scars in the people you love most and gets in the way of your friendships and work relationships. Chronic, intense anger makes it hard for others to trust you, speak honestly, or feel comfortable - they never know what is going to set you off or what you will do. Explosive anger is especially damaging to children.

Anger Management

The goal of anger management is to reduce both your emotional feelings and the physiological arousal that anger causes. You can't get rid of, or avoid, the things or the people that enrage you, nor can you change them, but you can learn to control your reactions.

Low self-esteem and related problems in a person is expressed outwardly in the form of aggressive behaviour whose base emotion is anger. A decrease in positivity leads to aggressive behaviour. Anger is neither good nor bad, whether you use it constructively or for destruction is all in your hands. Mahatma Gandhi as well as Hitler, both were aggressive but how they made use of it made all the difference and is well known to the world.

There are psychological tests that measure the intensity of angry feelings - how prone to anger you are, and how well you handle it. But chances are good that if you do have a problem with anger, you already know it. If you find yourself acting in ways that seem out of control and frightening, you might need help finding better ways to deal with this emotion.



Your self help guide to know if you are in the Danger Zone

Given here are a few questions for which you have to respond in either yes or no. None of the answers are right or wrong.

		Yes	No
1.	Some of my friends feel that I am irritable.		
2.	I can become violent also to get my rights.		
3.	If things don't go according to my way, i get into an argument even against my will.		
4.	I feel as if I am helpless.		
5.	I remain alert when confronted with strangers who are more than amiable.		
6.	I become violent if somebody provokes me.		
7.	Jealousy overwhelms me sometimes.		
8.	I feel that there has always been injustice all my life.		
9.	I am not able to control my anger.		
10.	I express my irritation when confronted with failure.		
11.	Sometimes I feel that people laugh at my back.		
12.	I feel bitterness for certain issues.		
13.	I get into quarrels more often than a normal person would.		
14.	My friends consider me as a person who loves to fall in disputes.		

If while answering the above questions you find yourself in affirmation most of the time, it is a signal that either in thoughts or behaviour you are aggressive.

It's best to find out what it is that triggers your anger, and then to develop strategies to keep those triggers from tipping you over the edge.

Strategies to Keep Anger at Bay

Be aware of your anger warning signs and triggers

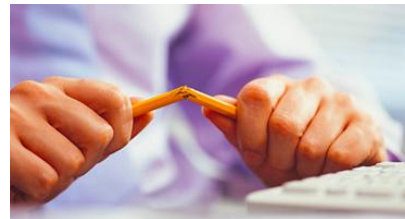
While you might feel that you just explode into anger without warning, but, in fact, there are physical warning signs in your body. Anger is a normal physical response. It fuels the “fight or flight” system of the body, and the angrier you get, the more your body goes into overdrive.



Becoming aware of your own personal signs that your temper is starting to boil allows you to take steps to manage your anger before it gets out of control.

Identify the negative thought patterns that trigger your temper

You may think that external things - the insensitive actions of other people, or frustrating situations - are what cause your anger. But anger problems have less to do with what happens to you than how you interpret and think about what happened.



Some common negative thinking patterns that trigger and fuel anger include:

- **Overgeneralizing:** For example, “You always interrupt me. You NEVER consider my needs. EVERYONE disrespects me. I NEVER get the credit I deserve.”
- **Obsessing on “shoulds” and “musts”:** Having a rigid view of the way things should or must be and getting angry when reality doesn’t line up with this vision.
- **Mind reading and jumping to conclusions:** Assuming you “know” what someone else is thinking or feeling - that he or she intentionally upset you, ignored your wishes, or disrespected you.
- **Collecting straws:** Looking for things to get upset about, usually while overlooking or blowing past anything positive. Letting these small irritations build and build until you reach the “final straw” and explode, often over something relatively minor.
- **Blaming:** When anything bad happens or something goes wrong, it’s always someone else’s fault. You blame others for the things that happen to you rather than taking responsibility for your own life.

Avoid people, places, and situations that bring out your worst

Stressful events don’t excuse anger, but understanding how these events affect you can help you take control of your environment and avoid unnecessary aggravation. Look at your regular routine and try to identify activities, times of day, people, places, or situations that

trigger irritable or angry feelings. Maybe you get into a fight every time you go out with a certain group of friends or maybe the traffic on your daily commute drives you crazy. Then think about ways to avoid these triggers or view the situation differently so it doesn't make your blood boil.

Relaxation

Simple relaxation tools, such as deep breathing and relaxing imagery, can help calm down angry feelings.

Some simple steps you can try:

- **Breathe deeply**, from your diaphragm; breathing from your chest won't relax you. Picture your breath coming up from your "gut."
- **Slowly repeat a calm word or phrase** such as "relax," "take it easy." Repeat it to yourself while breathing deeply.
- **Use imagery**; visualize a relaxing experience, from either your memory or your imagination.
- **Non strenuous, slow yoga-like exercises** can relax your muscles and make you feel much calmer.



Practice these techniques and learn to use them automatically when you're in a tense situation.

Cognitive Restructuring

Simply change the way you think. Angry people tend to curse, swear, or speak in highly colourful terms that reflect their inner thoughts. When you're angry, your thinking can get much exaggerated and overly dramatic. Try replacing these thoughts with more rational ones. For instance, instead of telling yourself, "oh, it's awful, it's terrible, everything's ruined," tell yourself, "it's frustrating, and it's understandable that I'm upset about it, but it's not the end of the world and getting angry is not going to fix it anyhow."

Be careful of words like "never" or "always" when talking about yourself or someone else. "This machine never works," or "you're always forgetting things" are not just inaccurate, they also serve to make you feel that your anger is justified and that there's no way to solve the problem. They also alienate and humiliate people who might otherwise be willing to work with you on a solution.

Remind yourself that getting angry is not going to fix anything; it won't make you feel better (actually may make you feel worse).

Logic defeats anger, because anger, even when it's justified, can quickly become irrational. So use cold hard logic on yourself. Remind yourself that the world is "not out to get you,"

you're just experiencing some of the rough spots of daily life. Do this each time you feel anger getting the best of you, and it'll help you get a more balanced perspective.

Angry people tend to demand things: fairness, appreciation, agreement, willingness to do things their way. Everyone wants these things, and we are all hurt and disappointed when we don't get them, but angry people demand them, and when their demands aren't met, their disappointment becomes anger. As part of their cognitive restructuring, angry people need to become aware of their demanding nature and translate their expectations into desires. In other words, saying, "I would like" something is healthier than saying, "I demand" or "I must have" something. When you're unable to get what you want, you will experience the normal reactions - frustration, disappointment, hurt - but not anger. Some angry people use this anger as a way to avoid feeling hurt, but that doesn't mean the hurt goes away.

Problem Solving

Sometimes, our anger and frustration are caused by very real and inescapable problems in our lives. Not all anger is misplaced, and often it's a natural response to these difficulties. There is also a cultural belief that every problem has a solution, and it adds to our frustration to find out that this isn't always the case. The best attitude to bring to such a situation, then, is not to focus on finding the solution, but rather on how you handle and face the problem.

Make a plan, and check your progress along the way. Resolve to give it your best, but also not to punish yourself if an answer doesn't come right away. If you can approach it with your best intentions and efforts and make a serious attempt to face it head-on, you will be less likely to lose patience and fall into all-or-nothing thinking, even if the problem does not get solved right away.

Better Communication

Angry people tend to jump to - and act on - conclusions, and some of those conclusions can be very inaccurate. The first thing to do if you're in a heated discussion is slow down and think through your responses. Don't say the first thing that comes into your head, but slow down and think carefully about what you want to say. At the same time, listen carefully to what the other person is saying and take your time before answering.

Listen to what is underlying the anger. For instance, you like a certain amount of freedom and personal space, and your "significant other" wants more connection and closeness. If he or she starts complaining about your activities, don't retaliate by painting your partner as a jailer, a warden, or an albatross around your neck.

It's natural to get defensive when you're criticized, but don't fight back. Instead, listen to what's underlying the words: the message that this person might feel neglected and unloved. It may take a lot of patient questioning on your part, and it may require some breathing space, but don't let your anger - or a partner's - let a discussion spin out of control. Keeping your cool can keep the situation from becoming a disastrous one.

Using Humor

"Silly humor" can help defuse rage in a number of ways. For one thing, it can help you get a more balanced perspective. When you get angry



and call someone a name or refer to them in some imaginative phrase, stop and picture what that word would literally look like. If you're at work and you think of a coworker as a "dirtbag" or a "single-cell life form," for example, picture a large bag full of dirt (or an amoeba) sitting at your colleague's desk, talking on the phone, going to meetings. Do this whenever a name comes into your head about another person. If you can, draw a picture of what the actual thing might look like. This will take a lot of the edge off your fury; and humor can always be relied on to help unknot a tense situation.

The underlying message of highly angry people, Dr. Deffenbacher says, is "things oughta go my way!" Angry people tend to feel that they are morally right, that any blocking or changing of their plans is an unbearable indignity and that they should NOT have to suffer this way. Maybe other people do, but not them!

When you feel that urge, he suggests, picture yourself as a god or goddess, a supreme ruler, who owns the streets and stores and office space, striding alone and having your way in all situations while others defer to you. The more detail you can get into your imaginary scenes, the more chances you have to realize that maybe you are being unreasonable; you'll also realize how unimportant the things you're angry about really are. There are two cautions in using humor. First, don't try to just "laugh off" your problems; rather, use humor to help yourself face them more constructively. Second, don't give in to harsh, sarcastic humor; that's just another form of unhealthy anger expression.

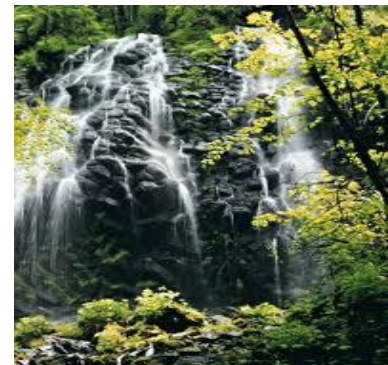


What these techniques have in common is a refusal to take yourself too seriously. Anger is a serious emotion, but it's often accompanied by ideas that, if examined, can make you laugh.

Changing Your Environment

Sometimes it's our immediate surroundings that give us cause for irritation and fury. Problems and responsibilities can weigh on you and make you feel angry at the "trap" you seem to have fallen into and all the people and things that form that trap.

Give yourself a break. Make sure you have some "personal time" scheduled for times of the day that you know are particularly stressful. Appreciating nature is a great reliever and distracts from situations and people that make you angry.



Some Other Tips for Easing Up on Yourself

Timing: If you and your spouse tend to fight when you discuss things at night - perhaps you're tired, or distracted, or maybe it's just habit - try changing the times when you talk about important matters so these talks don't turn into arguments.

Avoidance: If your child's chaotic room makes you furious every time you walk by it, shut the door. Don't make yourself look at what infuriates you. Don't say, "Well, my child should

clean up the room so I won't have to be angry!" That's not the point. The point is to keep yourself calm.

Finding alternatives: If your daily commute through traffic leaves you in a state of rage and frustration, give yourself a project - learn or map out a different route, one that's less congested or more scenic. Or find another alternative, such as a bus or commuter train.

Do You Need Counselling?

If you feel that your anger is really out of control and is having impact on your relationships and on important parts of your life, you might consider counselling to learn how to handle it better. A psychologist or mental health professional can work with you in developing a range of techniques for changing your thinking and your behaviour.

When you talk to a prospective therapist, tell her or him that you have problems with anger that you want to work on, and ask about his or her approach to anger management. Make sure this isn't only a course of action designed to "put you in touch with your feelings and express them" - that may be precisely what your problem is. With counselling, psychologists say, a highly angry person can move closer to a middle range of anger in about 8 to 10 weeks, depending on the circumstances and the techniques used.

What About Assertiveness Training?

Angry people need to learn to become assertive (rather than aggressive), but most books and courses on developing assertiveness are aimed at people who don't feel enough anger. These people are more passive and acquiescent than the average person; they tend to let others walk all over them. That isn't something that most angry people do. Still, these books can contain some useful tactics to use in frustrating situations.

Remember, you can't eliminate anger - and it wouldn't be a good idea if you could. In spite of all your efforts, things will happen that will cause you anger; and sometimes it will be justifiable anger. Life will be filled with frustration, pain, loss, and the unpredictable actions of others. You can't change that, but you can change the way you let such events affect you. Controlling your angry responses can keep them from making you even more unhappy in the long run.

Learn ways to cool down

Once you know how to recognize the warning signs that your temper is rising and anticipate your triggers, you can act quickly to deal with your anger before it spins out of control. There are many techniques that can help you cool down and keep your anger in check.



Quick tips for cooling down

- **Focus on the physical sensations of anger.** While it may seem counterintuitive, tuning into the way your body feels when you're angry often lessens the emotional intensity of your anger.
- **Take some deep breaths.** Deep, slow breathing from the abdomen, getting as much fresh air as possible into your lungs helps counteract rising tension.
- **Exercise** A brisk walk is a great idea. It releases pent-up energy so you can approach the situation with a cooler head.
- **Use your senses.** Take advantage of the relaxing power of your sense of sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste. Try listening to music or picturing in a favourite place.
- **Stretch or massage areas of tension.** Roll your shoulders if you are tensing them, for example, or gently massage your neck and scalp.
- **Slowly count to ten.** Focus on the counting to let your rational mind catch up with your feelings. If you still feel out of control by the time you reach ten, start counting again.



Give yourself a reality check

When you start getting upset about something, take a moment to think about the situation.



Ask yourself:

- How important is it in the grand scheme of things?
- Is it really worth getting angry about it?
- Is it worth ruining the rest of my day?
- Is my response appropriate to the situation?
- Is there anything I can do about it?
- Is taking action worth my time?

Find healthier ways to express your anger

If you've decided that the situation is worth getting angry about and there's something you can do to make it better, the key is to express your feelings in a healthy way. When communicated respectfully and channelled effectively, anger can be a tremendous source of energy and inspiration for change.

Pinpoint what you're really angry about

Have you ever got into an argument over something silly? Big fights often happen over something small, like a dish left out or being ten minutes late. But there's usually a bigger issue behind it. If you find your irritation and anger rapidly rising, ask yourself "What am I really angry about?" Identifying the real source of frustration will help you communicate your anger better, take constructive action, and work towards a resolution.



Always fight fair

It's okay to be upset at someone, but if you don't fight fair, the relationship will quickly break down. Fighting fair allows you to express your own needs while still respecting others.

- **Make the relationship your priority.** Maintaining and strengthening the relationship, rather than "winning" the argument, should always be your first priority. Be respectful of the other person and his or her viewpoint.
- **Focus on the present.** Once you are in the heat of arguing, it's easy to start throwing past grievances into the mix. Rather than looking to the past and assigning blame, focus on what you can do in the present to solve the problem.
- **Choose your battles.** Conflicts can be draining, so it's important to consider whether the issue is really worthy of your time and energy. If you pick your battles rather than fighting over every little thing, others will take you more seriously when you are upset.
- **Be willing to forgive.** Resolving conflict is impossible if you're unwilling or unable to forgive. Resolution lies in releasing the urge to punish, which can never compensate for our losses and only adds to our injury by further depleting and draining our lives.
- **Know when to let something go.** If you can't come to an agreement, agree to disagree. It takes two people to keep an argument going. If a conflict is going nowhere, you can choose to disengage and move on.

Developing your conflict resolution skills

The way you respond to differences and disagreements at home and at work can create hostility and irreparable rifts, or it can build safety and trust. Learning how to resolve conflict in a positive way will help you strengthen your relationships.



When to seek help for anger management

If your anger is still spiralling out of control, despite putting the previous anger management techniques into practice, or if you're getting into trouble with the law or hurting others - you

need more help. There are many therapists, classes, and programs for people with anger management problems. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. You'll often find others in the same shoes, and getting direct feedback on techniques for controlling anger can be tremendously helpful.

Consider professional help if:

- You feel constantly frustrated and angry no matter what you try.
- Your temper causes problems at work or in your relationships.
- You avoid new events and people because you feel like you can't control your temper.
- You have got in trouble with the law due to your anger.
- Your anger has ever led to physical violence.
- **Therapy for anger problems.** Therapy explores the reasons behind your anger. If you don't know why you are getting angry, it's very hard to control. Therapy provides a safe environment to learn more about your reasons and identify triggers for your anger. It's also a safe place to practice new skills in expressing your anger.
- **Anger management classes or groups.** Anger management classes or groups allow you to see others coping with the same struggles. You will also learn tips and techniques for managing your anger and hear other people's stories. For domestic violence issues, traditional anger management is usually not recommended. There are special classes that go to the issue of power and control that are at the heart of domestic violence.

